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Science Panel Says U.S. Shouldn't Classify Research Unless the Soviets Would Benefit

By ARLEN J. LARGE

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—Representatives of the U.S. science establishment said the government should put a clear "classified" stamp on research that could benefit the Soviet Union, but otherwise shouldn't infringe on the normal free flow of world-wide discussion between scientists.

The recommendation came from a 19-member panel of the National Academy of Sciences. The panel's report was in response to a growing dispute between academic researchers jealous of their freedom to jaw-bone with each other about their work, and federal officials fearful that Soviet snoopers will benefit from these papers and conversations.

The academy panel agreed with the government that Moscow has been gorging on advanced U.S. technology to the benefit of its military machine. But the panel said this has mainly occurred because of outright commercial sale of computers and other sophisticated hardware, legally or not, or because of thefts by Russian spies.

"There is a strong consensus," the panel said, "that universities and open scientific communication have been the sources of very little of this technology transfer problem." It said "security by accomplishment" in the nation's scientific laboratories was preferable to "security by secrecy."

Implications Spelled Out

At a news conference here yesterday, the panel's chairman, Dale Corson, professor emeritus of Cornell University, tried to spell out the report's implications.

"Where specific information has direct military relevance and must perforce be

kept secret," he said, "it should be classified strictly and guarded carefully. Most universities, however, will not accept classified research."

The academy's report comes at a time of tense relations between the Reagan administration and the academic science community, parts of which were already upset by proposed cuts in their research budgets. Last winter, then-deputy CIA director Bobby Inman warned at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that researchers might have to submit their findings to government censors before publication to prevent disclosures of military significance to the Soviets.

The tension sharply intensified in August at an international symposium of the Society of Photo-Optical Instrumentation Engineers in San Diego. With little warning, the Defense Department blocked presentation of more than 150 unclassified scientific papers, written under government grants, on the ground that Soviets and other foreigners would be present.

Olive Branch Extended

All this has produced a series of angry editorials in Science magazine, the main channel by which scientists talk to each other on policy matters. In an editorial last month entitled "Hand-Cuffing Science," publisher William Carey sharply criticized the "surprise strike" by the government in San Diego.

In an interview, yesterday, Mr. Carey said the academy's new report "is a useful start that could lead to tamping down the controversy." However, he characterized it as an "olive branch" being extended by organized science to the government, acknowledging the problem of giving away technology. He said the government now owes science an olive branch in return. "The controversy hasn't been closed," he said.

The Reagan administration appeared to accept the scientists' olive branch. George Keyworth, President Reagan's science adviser, said the report made some "very helpful" points. "The last thing we want to do is stifle technological innovation through obsession with secrecy," Mr. Keyworth said. "Still, there are some sensitive areas of research and technology where some control, short of security classification, is warranted."

Conciliatory Approach

Cornell's Mr. Corson, chairman of the academy's panel, said yesterday the Defense Department's "process was wrong" in the San Diego paper-suppressing incident. Otherwise, the group went out of its way to avoid seeming to be picking a fight with the administration. The study was financed in part by the Defense Department itself, and panel members got secret briefings by intelligence agencies on specific instances of technology leakage to the Soviet Union.

The panel said that in certain limited circumstances an unclassified, government-financed research paper could be submitted to the government for "modifications." But it also said the government shouldn't try to use export-control laws originally aimed at equipment shipments to suppress the exchange of scientific data, as has been attempted recently.

The National Academy of Sciences is a private group of top researchers in their fields, with a congressional charter to give the government advice on scientific matters.